

Andrew Jackson to John Quincy Adams, July 21, 1838, from Correspondence of Andrew Jackson. Edited by John Spencer Bassett.

TO JOHN QUINCY ADAMS.¹

1 Copy. Handwriting of A. J. Donelson. This letter was sent to Francis P. Blair for publication. He held it in his hands and, Aug. 2, wrote Jackson saying that to publish it would only involve him in a newspaper controversy with Adams. Blair advised that Jackson withdraw the letter to Adams and instead write to Howard, chairman of the committee on foreign affairs, thanking him for his defense of Jackson and explaining the facts with regard to the letter. This, he said, would be more dignified and Howard and other Jackson men would do all needful fighting. In truth, Jackson's letter to Adams was not likely to do any good to the reputation of the writer, if it came before the people. See Jackson to Blair Aug. 14, 1838, p. 563, *post*.

Hermitage, July 21, 1838.

Sir, Having just learned from the public journals that, in the debate in the House of Representatives on the subject of the annexation of Texas to the U States, you produced and read a letter of mine to Mr. Fulton, the Secretary and at that period acting Govr of the Territory of Arkansas, you will not be surprised that I avail myself of the earliest opportunity to inquire of you how that letter came into your possession. This information, it appears from the same debate, you refused to communicate to the chairman of the committee of Foreign relations, notwithstanding the letter had been called for by the House of Representatives, and it was known that neither that letter nor the report made in reply to it by Mr. Fulton was on the files of any of the Executive Departments.

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Seeing as you must have done from the communication made to the Secretary of State by Mr. Fulton that he had received this letter in due time and had made the enquiries proposed by it with the view of guarding our peaceful relations with Mexico, and had reported the result of the same to me; and being also aware, as you must have been if you read the Executive answer to the call of the House for these papers, that they had been the subject of much anxious search, it is extraordinary that you were not sensible of the obligation you were under to return these papers to their proper owners and to acquit yourself of all agency in purloining them by a prompt exposure of the circumstances under which you became possessed of them. Upon your failure, however, thus to fulfil a duty which every honorable mind must declare rested upon you after you consented to receive this confidential letter, it is not my intention here to comment. It is merely referred to as explaining the ground on which rests the application now directly and formally made to you for the channel through which you obtained this letter in order that the person who purloined it may be held responsible for the theft or burglary. You will surely not hesitate to give this information to me, when by your own voluntary act the stolen property is found in your possession, for you are too well acquainted with criminal law not to know that where one is found in possession of such property he is held as the reputed thief until he accounts satisfactorily for the manner in which he came by it.

The gratuitous declaration made by you that the confidential letter in question was never sent, though written, to Mr. Fulton, is not more surprising than the violence you have done your character in the use made of the letter. Permit me to ask, why, before you hazarded such a declaration, you did not enquire of Mr. Fulton who was near you, a member of the Senate, how the fact was. He would at once and cheerfully have told you that he received my letter, promptly acted upon it, and reported all the information he could acquire of the reputed movements on the frontier hostile to Mexico. This report was filed with my letter and I have a right therefore to assume is also in your possession, but has been withheld from the public.

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But I shall dwell upon this subject no longer than to express my hope that you will give me the information I have asked for in respect to the purloining of my letter, and that you will return it to me. For be assured I can take no pleasure in exposing the folly or crime of one who has maintained a character so exalted as yours has been by the favor of your country. I am as anxious to avoid the pain as you should be the disgrace of an exposure that will make you the recipient of stolen property or a confederate with purloiners.²

² Both Jackson and Adams were mistaken in important matters with respect to this letter, as the following statement of facts shows. In 1830 Sam Houston was in Washington and spoke to Dr. Mayo about his plans in Texas. Mayo revealed them in a letter to Jackson, who sent a letter to Fulton, secretary of Arkansas, telling him that the story was probably erroneous, but that a careful watch should be kept on the border and report be made to the President in case suspicious circumstances were observed. As he was about to leave Washington Jackson returned the Mayo letter to the writer of it and by mistake sent with it the copy he had retained of the warning letter to Fulton. Mayo placed both letters in the hands of John Quincy Adams, who assumed that the letter he held directed to Fulton was the original, not a copy, and that after writing it Jackson had decided not to send it, thus giving opportunity to Houston to carry out his plans. This was the substance of Adams's charge in the house. Jackson's error arose from the fact that he did not know that he had sent the copy to Mayo. He jumped at the conclusion that the letter had been stolen. See vol. IV., p. 212 n.

I shall wait a convenient time for your answer, and remain with due respect

yr. svt.